

'Big Brother' at Hand

By Tom Wicker

Daniel Schorr has reported for CBS News that President Ford fears current investigations will uncover several assassinations of foreign officials by the Central Intelligence Agency. Mr. Schorr's report followed testimony by Attorney General Edward Levi that the late J. Edgar Hoover, as Director of the Federal Bureau of Intelligence, had kept and used files of derogatory information on public personalities, and allowed the F.B.I. to be used by various Presidents for domestic political purposes.

Mr. Levi only confirmed what had long been generally believed, although there may be more shocking details to come, since some of Mr. Hoover's "OC" ("official and confidential") files were moved to his house at the time of his death in 1971. The confirmation, nevertheless, leaves Congress little choice but to close the legal gaps through which Mr. Hoover and at least three Presidents—Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon—misused the F.B.I. and the power that inevitably accrues to its director.

Mr. Levi told a House subcommittee that he and Justice Department officials were developing a set of "guidelines" to prevent such abuses in the future—for example, President Johnson's use of the F.B.I. to seek information on campaign aides of his opponents in the 1964 Presidential election, or Mr. Hoover's dissemination of derogatory information gathered by an F.B.I. agent on a Member of Congress who attacked Mr. Hoover.

But internal guidelines—surely the F.B.I. already has some, at least officially—are not enough, particularly since Mr. Levi's testimony concerned only a narrow range of activity, but suggested how widespread and dangerous the use of the F.B.I. probably has been, either by Mr. Hoover or by his Presidential overlords. Guidelines can and obviously have been ignored; they can be changed as men and circumstances change; they can even be used as a front, to profess innocence while camouflaging guilt.

And although Congressional sloth, and fear of Mr. Hoover—well grounded, as Mr. Levi confirmed—contributed much to make these abuses possible, improved Congressional oversight cannot completely rectify the situation. A huge, secretive investigative agency can't be supervised in that much detail, particularly by a changing body of politicians with hundreds of other interests and problems. Nor can either guidelines or Congressional oversight, helpful as both might be, control Presidents or the relationship between a President and a Director of the F.B.I.

Similar House and Senate commit-

tees belatedly investigating the "intelligence community," including the F.B.I., will have to devise better means to protect themselves and the American people from secret police tactics wielded at so high a level. What Mr. Levi confirms that Mr. Hoover did should be made a crime, as it should be a crime, impeachable and indictable, for a President to order the F.B.I. to take actions Congress could specifically define as illegal—whether or not he attempts to stretch the cloak of "national security" to cover them.

These committees face a more complex problem in dealing with the subject of Mr. Schorr's report. That the White House did not deny that report suggests what can be unequivocally confirmed here—that President Ford does believe that close investigation of C.I.A. covert operations abroad would disclose activities—including assassinations—that would shock the American people, stain the reputations of numerous past Presidents, and raise difficult problems of international relations. That is why in appointing his "blue ribbon" panel to investigate the C.I.A., he carefully limited its inquiry to domestic activities, and chose a group of men he could rely upon not to go an inch past that limit into the area of covert operations abroad.

IN THE NATION

Senator Frank Church also sees the primary task of his committee to investigate the intelligence community as one of determining to what extent agencies like the F.B.I. and the C.I.A. have contributed to the growth of "big brother government, and the implicit threat that this represents to the freedom of the people." But his committee has ample jurisdiction to look into C.I.A. covert operations, and he intends to do so, primarily with an eye to controlling or preventing them in the future, rather than exposing those of the past.

In fact, the line between covert action abroad and "big brother government" at home may not be so distinct as Mr. Ford seems to think. Watergate, the burglary of Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist, the concocting of fake cables in the White House, have shown how C.I.A. "covert" techniques and personnel can be imported into domestic politics. If those techniques include assassination, why might not that too someday be seen as a necessary tool for "national security" right here at home? The mentality that can order or condone murder for political purposes abroad need not be greatly warped to order or condone murder for political purposes at home, particularly when the instrument to carry it out is ready at hand.

Report on C.I.A. Assassinations

Daniel Schorr of CBS News has reported that President Ford is concerned that investigations into the Central Intelligence Agency will uncover alleged C.I.A. involvement in the assassinations of at least three foreign officials in the 1960's or late 1950's.

Mr. Schorr said the assassinations were discovered two years ago by the then Director of Central Intelligence, James R. Schlesinger who ordered such activities to end. Mr. Ford was said to have learned about the assassinations when he was briefed on C.I.A. domestic activities late last year. The White House and the C.I.A. have declined to comment on Mr. Schorr's report.